

Message Text

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INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07

L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15
USIA-06 TRSE-00 BIB-01 IO-13 EB-07 /079 W
-----046815 222153Z /14

R 221700Z JUN 77

FM AMEMBASSY ROME
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5463
INFO AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMCONSUL NAPLES
AMCONSUL MILAN
AMCONSUL GENOA
AMCONSUL FLORENCE
AMCONSUL PALERMO

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 ROME 10337

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, IT
SUBJECT: THE DECLINE OF THE ITALIAN PARLIAMENT

SUMMARY: WITH MOST LEGISLATIVE ISSUES "FROZEN" FOR CONSIDERATION IN THE PROLONGED INTERPARTY NEGOTIATIONS FOR A PROGRAM AGREEMENT, PARLIAMENTARY ACTIVITY IS GRINDING TO A HALT. THE TALKS HAVE DRAMATIZED THE FURTHER EROSION OF PARLIAMENT'S AUTHORITY AND DEMOCRATIC FUNCTIONS. MORE AND MORE, PARLIAMENT HAS BEEN REDUCED TO AN INSTRUMENT FOR RATIFYING PRE-COORDINATED POLITICAL AGREEMENTS ON SIGNIFICANT LEGISLATION. SURPRISES, SUCH AS THE RECENT UNEXPECTED DEFEAT OF THE ABORTION LAW IN THE SENATE, ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN. TO BE SURE, PARTY VOTING DISCIPLINE IS UNUSUALLY STRONG IN ITALY, AND ITALIAN POLITICS HAS ALWAYS BEEN PLAYED OUT (BY PARLIAMENTARIANS THEMSELVES) IN INTRICATE BACK-ROOM NEGOTIATIONS. HOWEVER, NOW THAT THE "OPPOSITION PARTY--THE PCI-- IS BECOMING A FULL PARTICIPANT IN THE ELABORATION OF THE GOVERNMENT'S PROGRAM, PARLIAMENT SEEMS TO

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BE ENTERING A PERIOD OF FURTHER DECLINE. END SUMMARY.

1. AS MOST MAJOR LEGISLATIVE ISSUES HAVE BEEN "FROZEN" FOR CONSIDERATION IN THE PROLONGED INTERPARTY NEGOTIATIONS FOR AN AGREEMENT ON THE MINORITY GOVERNMENT'S PROGRAM, PARLIAMENTARY ACTIVITY IS FAST GRINDING TO A HALT. ON JUNE 8, THE DAY AFTER THE UNEXPECTED REJECTION OF THE

ABORTION BILL, THE SENATE ADJOURNED UNTIL JUNE 21 FOR WANT OF ANYTHING TO DO. THE CHAMBER DESULTORILY COMPLETED ITS WORK AND WENT INTO RECESS JUNE 20. THE INTERPARTY NEGOTIATIONS HAVE EFFECTIVELY PARALYZED PARLIAMENTARY CONSIDERATION OF VIRTUALLY EVERY IMPORTANT PROBLEM--PUBLIC ORDER, POLICE REFORM, UNIVERSITY REORGANIZATION, HEALTH REFORM AND SO ON.

2. WITH THE PROGRAM NEGOTIATIONS GOING ON OUTSIDE OF PARLIAMENT, NOT A FEW MEMBERS OF THE LEGISLATURE HAVE TAKEN TO LAMENTING THE STEADY DECLINE IN THE AUTHORITY AND FUNCTIONS OF THAT BODY. THE POLITICAL PRESS IS ALSO BEGINNING TO NOTE THE EROSION OF PARLIAMENT'S AUTHORITY. ONE COMMENTATOR RECENTLY CONCLUDED THAT A SIGN SHOULD BE HUNG ON PARLIAMENT'S DOOR: "CLOSED FOR REPAIRS. PLEASE REFER DIRECTLY TO THE POLITICAL PARTIES." THE DECLINE IS ALL THE MORE IRONIC BECAUSE OF THE EMPHASIS THAT HAD BEEN PLACED BY BOTH THE DC AND PCI ON THE "NEW CENTRAL ROLE OF PARLIAMENT" WHEN THE ANDREOTTI GOVERNMENT WAS FORMED LAST AUGUST.

3. TO BE SURE, THE EROSION OF PARLIAMENTARY AUTHORITY WELL PRECEDED THE FORMATION OF THE MINORITY GOVERNMENT, AND THE ITALIAN PARLIAMENT HAS HISTORICALLY SERVED NOT SO MUCH AS A FORUM FOR DEMOCRATIC DEBATE AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR RATIFYING (WITH COMPLETE PARTY DISCIPLINE)

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PRE-COORDINATED POLITICAL AGREEMENTS. IN RECENT YEARS, THESE BACK-ROOM NEGOTIATIONS INCLUDED THE PCI AS WELL. AFTER THE JUNE 1976 NATIONAL ELECTIONS, BOTH THE DC AND THE PCI MADE MUCH OF THE FACT THAT PARLIAMENT WAS TO HAVE A NEW, CENTRAL ROLE. WITH THE PCI SUPPORTING THE GOVERNMENT THROUGH ABSTENTION, THE DC ASSERTED IT WOULD PROPOSE ITS LEGISLATION DIRECTLY TO PARLIAMENT AND PUBLIC FOR OPEN NEGOTIATION AND DEBATE. THE PCI WOULD NO LONGER BE ABLE TO OBFUSCATE ITS POSITIONS ON UNCOMFORTABLE ISSUES AND WOULD HAVE TO BECOME PUBLICLY ACCOUNTABLE FOR ITS ACTIONS IN PARLIAMENT. FOR ITS OWN PURPOSES, THE PCI ALSO MAGNIFIED PARLIAMENT'S NEW ROLE. THE PCI REGISTERED ITS ELECTORAL GAINS BY ENHANCING ITS ORGANIZATIONAL ROLE IN PARLIAMENT. THEY WON THE PRESIDENCY OF THE CHAMBER (INGRAO) AND SEVEN COMMITTEE CHAIRMANSHIPS. THUS, PARLIAMENT, FORTIFIED BY A SIZEABLE INFUSION OF NEW POLITICAL BLOOD (OVER 40 0/0 OF THE DC DEPUTIES, FOR EXAMPLE, ARE FIRST-TERMERS) WAS TO BECOME THE SCENE OF THE ACTION.

4. IN PRACTICE, HOWEVER, PARLIAMENT NEVER REALLY GOT

A CHANCE. GOVERNMENT (DC) AND PCI LIEUTENANTS CONTINUED TO MEET IN THE CORRIDORS OF PARLIAMENT TO WORK OUT SIGNIFICANT PIECES OF LEGISLATION BEFORE THEY WERE SUBMITTED TO THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS AND THEN TO PARLIAMENT. UNDER THE PRESSURES OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS, THE GOVERNMENT MADE WIDE USE OF ITS RIGHT TO INTRODUCE DECREE LEGISLATION. ALTHOUGH DECREES LAWS MUST BE APPROVED BY BOTH HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT WITHIN 60 DAYS, NONE HAS BEEN REJECTED AND MOST WERE PASSED

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USIA-06 TRSE-00 BIB-01 IO-13 EB-07 /079 W
-----047139 222154Z /14

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WITHOUT SUBSTANTIAL MODIFICATION--A REFLECTION OF THEIR PRE-COORDINATED ORIGINS. EVEN CHAMBER PRESIDENT INGRAO HAS COMPLAINED THAT PARLIAMENT PASSED 44 DECREES LAWS WITHIN THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF THIS LEGISLATURE, ALREADY EQUALLING A THIRD OF THE 126 DECREES LAWS REGISTERED DURING THE ENTIRE FOUR YEARS OF THE LAST LEGISLATURE. SENATE PRESIDENT FANFANI (DC) HAS ALSO REPEATEDLY COMPLAINED OF THE "ABNORMALITIES" OF CURRENT PARLIAMENTARY PRACTICE.

5. THERE ARE UNDOUBTEDLY A VARIETY OF REASONS FOR THE PROGRESSIVE WEAKENING OF PARLIAMENTARY FUNCTIONS. PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT IS THAT OVER THE YEARS ITALIAN POLITICS HAS ALWAYS BEEN PLAYED OUT BY THE

PARTIES IN INTRICATE COMBINATIONS OF INTER-PARTY
AND FACTIONAL ALLIANCES. AS LONG AS A STRONG
PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION EXISTED, HOWEVER, PARLIA-
MENTARY DEMOCRACY COULD MORE OR LESS SURVIVE THE
INTERPARTY HORSETRADING THAT WENT INTO IMPORTANT
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LEGISLATION. WITH THE PCI NOW SUPPORTING THE GOVERN-
MENT, ALBEIT THROUGH ABSTENTION, THE FORMAL OPPOSI-
TION NOW CONSISTS OF AN INSIGNIFICANT FRINGE OF FAR-
RIGHT AND FAR-LEFT PARTIES WHICH ARE BASICALLY EX-
CLUDED FROM MEANINGFUL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION. THE
DC AND THE FIVE ABSTAINING PARTIES CONTROL FULLY
91 PERCENT OF THE SEATS IN THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES.
MORE AND MORE, IN THE WORDS OF DC MILAN PROVINCIAL
SECRETARY AND RENEWAL LEADER, ON ROBERTO
MAZZOTTA, "PARLIAMENT IS BEING EMPTIED OF ALL OF ITS
POWERS AND REDUCEDF SIMPLY TO A PLACE FOR RATIFICATION,
AS IT IS IN EVERY UNDEMOCRATIC SYSTEM". IN AN OBVIOUS
REFERENCE TO THE ALARMING GROWTH OF SOCIAL UNREST AND
POLITICAL VIOLENCE, MZZOTTA WARNS THAT "BY PREVENTING
SOCIAL DISSENT FROM BEING CHANNELLED INTO AN
OPPOSITON PARTY, THE PIAZZA HAS BECOME THE SUBSTITUTE
FOR REPRESENTATIVE CHAMBERS".

6. PERHAPS THE MOST TELLING EXAMPLE OF THE DECLINE
OF PARLIAMENT WAS PROVIDED BY LAST SPRING'S DELICATE
AND DIFFICULT NEGOTIATIONS FOR THE IMF STANDBY LOAN.
FOR WEEKS THE GOVERNMENT WAS FORCED TO NEGOTIATE WITH AND
MEDIATE AMONG THE POLITICAL PARTIES, THE TRADE UNIONS, AND THE
REPRESENTATIVES OF INDUSTRY ON THE SPECIFIC ELEMENTS
OF THE COUNTRY'S ECONOMIC STABILIZATION PROGRAM.
PARLIAMENT'S ROLE WAS REDUCED TO RUBBER-STAMPING THE
GOVERNMENT'S LETTER OF INTENT ONCE THE AGREEMENT
WAS REACHED. THE RECENT UNEXPECTED DEFEAT OF THE
ABORTION BILL IN THE SENATE CREATED MOMENTARY PANIC
AMONG THE POLITICAL PARTIES UNTIL IT WAS UNDERSTOOD
THAT IT WAS BUT AN UNPROGRAMMED INCIDENT THAT COULD
BE PUT STRAIGHT IN A FEW MONTHS' TIME BY REINTRODUCING
THE SAME LEGISLATION IN PARLIAMENT. WITH THE
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DC ACCUSED BY THE LEFT OF PROVOCATION, ARROGANCE
AND IRRESPONSIBILITY, THE ABORTION VOTE WAS ANOTHER
INDICATION THAT PARLIAMENT IS NOT EXPECTED TO DECIDE
ANYTHING THAT HAS NOT BEEN PREVIOUSLY COORDINATED.

7. IN WORKING OUT THE ELEMENTS OF A PROGRAM AGREEMENT, ISSUES THAT ARE TOO TOUGH OR CONTENTIOUS ARE BEING SET ASIDE SO THAT THEY MAY BE CONSIDERED LATER BY PARLIAMENT. THE POLICE REFORM LAW, FOR EXAMPLE, WILL PROBABLY BE "LEFT FOR PARLIAMENT" BECAUSE OF THE PRESENT INABILITY TO REACH A CONSENSUS OVER UNIONIZATION. THE DC AND LIBERAL SINSIST ON AN INDEPENDENT UNION: THE LEFT PARTIES ARE EQUALLY ADAMANT ON THE RIGHT TO JOIN THE COMMUNIST-DOMINATED TRADE UNION FEDERATION. FEW OBSERVERS, HOWEVER, BELIEVE THAT THE ISSUE WILL ACTUALLY BE "LEFT TO PARLIAMENT". LEAVING SOMETHING FOR DECISON BY PARLIAMENT HAS BECOME A EUPEHISM FOR PUTTING OFF A CONTENTIOUS DECISON. ONCE THE POLITICAL PARTIES ARE ABOE TO RESOLVE THEIR DIFFERNCES, PARLIAMENT WILL THEN DO THE HONORS.

8. COMMENT: PROBABLY BECAUSE OF ITS PROPORTIONAL VOTING SYSTEM, AND THE ENORMOUS POWER THIS GIVES TO PARTY ORGANIZATIONS, THE ITALIAN PARLIAMENT HAS ALWAYS BEEN A WEAKER AND LESS ACTIVE INSTITUTION THAN MOST WESTERN PARLIAMENTS. NEVERTHELESS, DURING THISPAST YEAR IN WHICH THERE HAS BEEN NO CLEAR MAJORITY AND CONSENSUS HAS BEEN THE ORDER OF THE DAY, PARLIAMENT'S ROLE HAS BEEN FURTHER ERODED. UNHAPPILY, THERE APPEARS TO BE LITTLE LIKELIHOOD THAT THIS TREND WILL BE REVERSED UNLESS AND UNTIL A CLEAR MAJORITY AND OPPOSITION ARE RE-ESTABLISHED, AND THAT SEEMS A LONG WAY OFF.GARDNER

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptoning: X
Capture Date: 01-Jan-1994 12:00:00 am
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENTS, CENTRAL LEGISLATURE, POLITICAL SITUATION
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Sent Date: 22-Jun-1977 12:00:00 am
Decaption Date: 01-Jan-1960 12:00:00 am
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1977ROME10337
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D770223-0603
Format: TEL
From: ROME
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1977/newtext/t19770631/aaaabanz.tel
Line Count: 253
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: d281e378-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION EUR
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 5
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 18-Mar-2005 12:00:00 am
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 2070743
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: THE DECLINE OF THE ITALIAN PARLIAMENT SUMMARY: WITH MOST LEGISLATIVE ISSUES "FROZEN" FOR CONSIDERATION IN THE PROLONGED INTERPARTY NEGOTIATIONS FOR
TAGS: PINT, IT
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvgwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/d281e378-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009